

AZHAR USMAN

Allah Made Me Funny

By ANJUM NAIM

On his first tour of India, the Indian American stand-up comic reminded his audiences that Muslims, like everyone else, laugh and cry.

Azhar Usman performs at Aligarh Muslim University.

I am doing more than just telling jokes. I am waging peace by promoting a better understanding of Muslims, using humor as my vehicle,” says Azhar Usman, an Indian American stand-up comedian who toured India in November.

It was the Chicago native’s first tour of India and he had audiences doubling up with laughter in New Delhi, Aligarh, Pune and Mumbai. The 32-year-old did not spare anybody with his jokes—his relatives, American society, not even himself.

Usman, whose India debut occurred at the American Center in New Delhi, is part of a troupe of Muslim comedians who perform under the banner “Allah Made Me Funny.” The son of immigrant parents from Bihar, Usman began his career as a corporate attorney. Why the change of profession? “Because I wanted to give voice to the voiceless. I had to tell the people that the community which I come from is not an ‘angry community,’” Usman explains. “We too entertain, we too enjoy and we too burst into laughter. Humor is an essential ingredient of life; it is embedded in human tem-

perament. Allah made me funny.”

Usman is aware there’s a very thin line between humor and satire and that ignoring it may cause serious complications. “To me, comedy is a funny way of being serious. I do not attack the positive values of society nor do I make fun of religious beliefs. I make human life the target of my jokes,” he says. So while he makes digs at his religious and ethnic community and at the presumptions of the society he lives in, he is careful not to cross the line that would turn the audience’s laughter into anger.

As a stand-up comic, it is absolutely vital for Usman to connect with his audiences and be capable of witty repartee. In this respect, performances at university campuses or youth clubs are his testing ground. Usman’s performances for students of the Indian Institute of Technology in New Delhi and the Aligarh Muslim University in Uttar Pradesh were unqualified hits.

Speaking before a crowd of 3,000 at Aligarh’s Kennedy Hall, Usman’s challenge was to not only entertain but to keep a check on the hecklers in the crowd. In fact, Usman’s father, an alumnus of the university, had warned his son that he would definitely encounter hecklers and that he would be successful only if he managed to win them over. Usman managed to control the crowd and kept them engrossed throughout the two-hour performance.

“I used to bring a big mirror to the stage and ask the audience to look at their faces in it, and laugh at yourself, because it is your face, and the...expressions are exclusively yours,” he says. “Perhaps the students were looking at their images in the mirror I showed them.”

Usman’s own image—imposing size, long hair, heavy beard—do not escape his comic sting. Even when the crowd can expect the punchline that’s coming, his delivery elicits laughs when he tells about spotting a suspicious-looking character at

the airport, only to learn that he is looking in a mirror.

Usman explains that there must be some boundaries even in comedy. “The butt of the joke cannot be religion or belief itself. I am very careful about sacrilegious humor. I am not a shock comic who is going to do something that will inflame the audience,” he says.

Indeed, Usman’s hilarious impersonation of an Indian aunty having a telephone conversation in which every word—*haan, ji haan, achcha*—means the same thing, “yes,” was so affectionate and true to life that the whole audience could see their own aunts right there on the stage.

Professor Abul Kalam Qasimi, director of Kennedy Hall, confesses that he was a bit apprehensive that “the jokes of this

American comedian may inflame the emotions of the students,...but Allah really made him funny.”

Usman’s interest in humor dates to his childhood in Illinois, in the American Midwest. “During my childhood, whenever I saw American comedians cracking jokes on everyday affairs, I thought some South Asian comedian could present his problems and challenges in the form of humor,” he says.

He translated his desire into action in 2001 with the help of two friends, African American comedian and writer Preacher Moss and Palestinian American Mo Amer. They established Allah Made Me Funny—The Official Muslim Comedy Tour. After successful shows all over America, Usman toured South Africa, Turkey, Egypt, England

and Pakistan.

“I wish I could come to the stage every day and tell the truth to the entire world,” says Usman. He thinks it is not possible for ordinary people to point out a king’s frailties to his face, to tell an emperor that he has no clothes. But a comedian can discharge this civic obligation.

So is Usman discharging a moral duty and mere entertainment is not his aim? Usman replies that he had posed the same

question to African American comedian and civil rights activist Dick Gregory, who said, “We should understand well that no entertainer ever could change the world through his art. He only shows a mirror to the world. However, there is always an activist inside every artist.”

If an artist considers his art a serious business, Usman says, his inherent activist will be more active. Usman’s mission is to negate the idea that Muslims are humorless. “To me this is not just about standing on stage telling jokes,” he says. “There is a lot riding on this.” Laughing and crying are part of being human, he told his New Delhi audience, and it is important to remember that Muslims, like everyone else, laugh and cry.

For more information:

Azhar Usman

www.azhar.com

America’s Funniest Muslim

<http://www.americaabroadmedia.org/programs/view/id/28>



Courtesy Azhar Usman